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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002327

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DEPT FOR EAP, EAP/MLS
NSC FOR MORROW
PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/24/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM TH

SUBJECT: PRASONG EXPANDS ON SURAYUD-SONTHI RIFT, DENIES RECOUP OR ELECTION DELAY

REF: A. BANGKOK 02304 (SONTHI'S AMBITIONS SURAYUD'S

WEAKNESS)

1B. BANGKOK 02302 (PREM ON THE KING THAKSIN AND THE POLITICAL SITUATION)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary. Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) Chairman and longtime political insider Prasong Soonsiri offered new details on the rumored rift between Prime Minister Surayud and Army Chief Sonthi in a meeting with the Ambassador on April 24. Prasong relayed discussions between himself and Sonthi on efforts to "gently" push Surayud out of office, but agreed with the Ambassador's assessment that any effort to elevate Sonthi to the PM job would be a "disaster."

Prasong likewise acknowledged the Ambassador's warning that a "recoup," reinstatement of martial law, or delay in elections would lead to fierce domestic and international opposition. Prasong appeared bullish on the prospects for passage of the draft constitution and confident that deposed-PM Thaksin's political party would be dissolved. End Summary.

PRASONG AND SONTHI'S PLAN VS. SURAYUD

12. (C) In a four-eyes meeting with the Ambassador on April 24, CDC Chair and erstwhile coup-plotter Prasong Soonsiri confirmed recent (ref A) rumors of a split between the PM and Army chief, while highlighting his role (by his own account) in the dynamic. Prasong began with a now-familiar criticism of the PM's performance, dismissing reports that Surayud was newly energized following his recent hospital visit. The Ambassador responded that Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda and members of the Council on National Security (CNS) had characterized their view of the government as not so much disappointment in Surayud, as a feeling that the cabinet was not doing enough to help the PM. Prasong rejected this argument, saying that the government's woes reflected a lack of leadership by the PM and that the cabinet should not be blamed. According to Prasong, Surayud has failed to lead and has a "hidden agenda." (Comment: unspecified but probably referring to Surayud's preference for a softer approach in dealing with Thaksin. End Comment.)

Prasong went on to say that Surayud refused to confront the enemy (i.e. Thaksin). In an anecdote illustrating Surayud's misguided attitude, Sonthi reportedly told Prasong that Surayud has characterized his decision to accept the PM job as a favor to the military. By contrast, Sonthi commented to Prasong that he had asked Surayud to take the top job as a favor to the country.

¶3. (C) On the hot topic of relations between Sonthi and Surayud, the Ambassador said that Prem had recently labeled them "fine." Prasong replied that Prem had called Sonthi to discuss the relationship between the PM and Army Chief, but that Sonthi had played down the disagreement because Prem is old and shouldn't be burdened with such things. Prasong went on to recount a lunch meeting a few days earlier with Sonthi, wherein the two of them formulated a new political plan. According to this account, Sonthi agreed he would go to Surayud and propose a sweeping cabinet change in order to improve the government's performance. (Note: it is not clear if recent, minor, cabinet shifts are a result of this effort. End Note.) This plan would likely engender two possible reactions. The first, hoped-for, reaction, according to Prasong, would be Surayud's own resignation. If Surayud did not offer to resign, Sonthi would be forced to inspire a series of demonstrations and a letter writing campaign calling for the PM to step down. Prasong underscored that Sonthi could not directly tell Surayud to step down, and that any effort to oust the PM must be done "gently."

¶4. (C) The Ambassador asked, under this plan, who would replace Surayud? Prasong agreed that there was no obvious candidate, though some people had suggested that he himself take the top job. The Ambassador underscored that the elevation of Army Chief Sonthi to the Prime Minister slot

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would be a "disaster" for Thailand, internally and externally. Prasong agreed, saying that he had advised Sonthi against taking the PM or even a Deputy Prime Minister job. He concurred that such a move would inspire a negative reaction, both domestically and internationally, and would cast the coup as a pretext for a military seizure of power. Prasong also acknowledged that Sonthi does not have the political skills to serve as PM. The Ambassador expounded our list of concerns, clearly stating that a "recoup," reinstatement of martial law or invocation of the Emergency Decree in Bangkok, or a delay of the elections scheduled for December, would likewise be unacceptable to the U.S. and international community. Prasong clearly agreed on all four points.

THE CONSTITUTION

¶5. (C) Turning to the draft constitution, Prasong said that his job was done, "for now." He had shepherded the first draft of the constitution out, on time. Prasong dismissed controversy over any of the clauses in the draft charter, explaining that the draft was meant to inspire public debate and revision, before being finalized. He compared this version to a house, recently constructed. The owners now have the freedom to change the color, the windows, the trim or the fixtures. The foundation, however, had been laid, in that this constitution would empower the people, through the judicial system, to hold their representatives accountable. (Note: several supporters and critics have made public note of the expanded rights in the draft charter for the public to directly challenge the government via the courts. End Note.)

¶6. (C) According to Prasong, the draft (presumably amended) charter should pass the coming public referendum. On specific provisions currently inspiring debate, Prasong acknowledged that some people opposed the appointed Senate, but said that he was open to better ideas. The new, multi-member parliamentary districts were not a problem. Some opponents to the charter were focusing on the lack of a

clause establishing Buddhism as the state religion. Prasong emphasized that this was not his unilateral decision, but was agreed to by the 35-member drafting body. None of the previous constitutions had such a clause. He explained that Thaksin and former PM Chawalit Yongchaiyudh were playing games with this issue in an effort to tarnish the interim government. Enshrining Buddhism as the state religion would have little impact on the nature of religion in this heavily Buddhist-country and would only complicate matters in the southern Muslim provinces.

PARTY DISSOLUTIONS

¶7. (C) Prasong appeared confident that Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party would be dissolved for election fraud in an upcoming court verdict. TRT would be able to reform, but with a tarnished reputation. More important, party leader Chaturon Chaiseng and the entire 100-member TRT executive board would be banned for politics for five years. Prasong was not as certain about the fate of the Democrat party, which faces similar charges and penalties. According to Prasong, the Democrats are likely to reconstitute themselves under new leadership--tossing current chief Abhisit Vejjajiva for former PM Chuan Leekpai--regardless of what the court decides. When asked for his perspective on Chat Thai leader Banharn Silapa-archa, Prasong doesn't believe that the former PM and master politician wants to hold the top job again: "he just wants his people in place."

COMMENT

¶8. (C) This was a good opportunity to voice our concerns, and offer a reality check to Prasong on the negative consequences of certain actions. Prasong's account may be colored by his own ambitions. While clearly working to further his own interest (and advance the possibility of his replacing

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Surayud) Prasong offered the most detail yet on the rift between Surayud and Sonthi. For all of Prasong's assurances, however, the Thai political dynamic appears to be beyond the control of any one man.

BOYCE